



## Half Game, Half Comic: How the Visual Novel Adapts Manga

Crawford, R. (2019). Half Game, Half Comic: How the Visual Novel Adapts Manga. *Intersections (Postgraduate Journal - Arts , Humanities , Social Sciences)*, 1(1), 58-62. <https://doi.org/10.21251/qccs-pd93>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

### Published in:

Intersections (Postgraduate Journal - Arts , Humanities , Social Sciences)

### Publication Status:

Published (in print/issue): 09/05/2019

### DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.21251/qccs-pd93>

### Document Version

Author Accepted version

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Issue 1 | May 2018

Ulster University Postgraduate Journal  
{Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences}

# Inter sections

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# Half Game, Half Comic: How the visual novel adapts Manga

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Dr. Ruth Brolly & Dr. Yuanyuan Chen

This paper will argue the seemingly paradoxical statement that a video game can also be a comic. It will explore how the visual novel adapts manga features in the video game form by using research and methodologies typically applied to comic studies – such as comic semiotics (Cohn, 2013) – on an area that is usually analysed solely via video game studies and methodologies (Poole, 2001; Azuma, 2009; van Zoggel, 2011; Greenwood, 2014; Chen & Crawford, 2018). This will involve a brief discussion using the comparative point-by-point method, as well as a literature review of relevant material on layers, space, sound, time and reading in manga and visual novels.

*Keywords: visual, novel, video, game, comic, semiotics, layers, compositing, space, time, reading.*

## 1. Introduction

Manga and Japanese video games have an existing relationship. From the earliest beginnings of the industry, when Shonen Jump mangaka (manga illustrator) Akira Toriyama was invited to do the character designs for Dragon Quest in 1986 to 'give it an authentic manga feel and instant customer recognition' (Kohler, 2005, pp. 86–7) the two industries and fandoms have been influential upon one another. Building on this existing relationship, this paper focusing on research in comic studies will discuss comics in comparison with an area that is usually examined solely through the lens of video game studies (Poole, 2001; Azuma, 2009; van Zoggel, 2011; Greenwood, 2014; Chen & Crawford, 2018). Using a comparative point-by-point method, this paper will argue the seemingly paradoxical statement that a video game can also be a comic by reviewing literature and applying methodologies— such as semiotics – from the field of comic studies and discussing the relationship with manga on the visual novel's (also known as sound novel (Cavallaro, 2009)) use of layers, space, sound, time and reading. volumes which I now discuss.

## 2. Layers and compositing in Manga and visual novels

This section will explore how layers and compositing in visual novels are influenced by manga. Just like manga, visual novels are made up of layers (Murakami and Bryce, 2009)—inside a panel there may be speech bubbles and text boxes, smaller images that might appear beside the text, or in the centre of the main panel as in Steins;Gate. While compositing in manga panes shows multiple parts of the same moment (LaMarre, 2009), compositing in visual novels (see fig.1) uses layers to help the reader become a character in the story; instead of viewing the comic from a distance, players are meant to view it in first-person.

**Fig. 1** Although not Japanese, the visual novel used as an example here is influenced by Japanese visual novels, and shows the influence of Japanese media on non-Japanese media, in the same way as original English non-Japanese manga does for manga (Brienza, 2013). This example shows how compositing creates a first-person perspective. Layers in order: background, skip button, text box, character image (sprite).

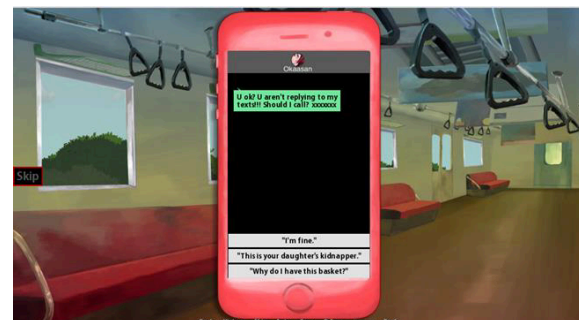


### 3. Space in Manga and visual novels

While the use of compositing appears in both manga and visual novels, the use of space in visual novels is also linked to manga. Manga typically uses less detailed characters set against highly detailed backgrounds, to bring additional depth to the printed page (Schodt, 1996). In a similar vein, visual novels that rely on 2D character sprites use less detailed characters, compared to their backdrops. *Steins;Gate* and *Psycho-pass: Mandatory Happiness* set their characters against detailed backgrounds, that add to the worldbuilding in a similar way as the manga iterations of their franchises. While the characters are stylised, their intricate backgrounds bring extra depth to the two-dimensional world.

Space in manga and visual novels can also refer to the space that is not used. McCloud (1994) has previously linked *wabi sabi* to manga, but it can also be related to the visual novel. *Wabi sabi* involves the deliberate implementation of spaces of nothing, sometimes creating *ma* (blankness/emptiness), while filling the rest of the space with art as an artifice of contrast (Juniper, 2003). Linked to everything from Ikebana (flower arranging) to Zen Buddhism (Juniper, 2003), *wabi sabi* can also be found in the deliberate absence of visual information in visual novels. Not every scene is depicted in manga (Ingulsrud & Allen, 2009): similarly, not every scene or action is depicted in a visual novel. While readers must fill in the blanks in between panels in a comic (McCloud, 1994; Schodt, 1996), players of visual novels imagine action when it does not appear on screen; in *Steins;Gate* this may mean that the player ignores the static nature of the character sprites, fight scenes that occur outside of the panel's frame, or the fact that no hand appears when the player interacts with the protagonist's phone (see fig. 2). Hence, artistic depth is also created through what is not depicted.

**Fig. 2** Example of a phone from *Little Red Riding Hood in Tokyo*, part of the practical element of Rebecca Crawford's PhD research. Notice the lack of hand depiction which is typical of the form. This game uses artwork by Claire Gadd-Hayward, Kirstin Andrews and Rebecca Crawford, coded by Ryan and Rebecca Crawford.



#### **4. Sound in Manga and visual novels**

The dimensional differences between reality and the page or screen are also important to consider when discussing space, how the real-world conflicts with the reading of print, digital readers battle against real-world (Groensteen, 2013) and digital distractions (Hague, 2014). Hence, digital comics that make use of music may find it easier to keep the reader focused (Groensteen, 2013) because sound links the fictional dimension to the real-world. Print manga also use sounds to draw attention, like the slight flutter as you turn a page (Hague, 2014). As Hague (2014) points out, sound is directional, giving a sense of time and space in a realm that exists in the second dimension. Visual novels often use music and SFX; the use of sound in a visual novel gives direction to the player, reminding them to focus on the story unfolding in front of their eyes.

#### **5. Time in Manga and visual novels**

Like space, the use of time in visual novels is influenced by manga. Manga pages use fewer words than Western comics; allocating more time to depicting actions and thoughts, which may only take up one panel in a comic, and last for pages upon pages in manga (Schodt, 1996). As Cohn (2013) points out, applying semiotics to the comic form, Japanese Visual Language (JVL) focuses more on part of a scene, over the whole scene, compared to American Visual Language (AVL); this is because comics tend to have an objective view, whereas manga is subjective. This subjectivity allows the intimate depiction of miniscule parts of everyday life (Schodt, 1996).

Consequently, manga chapters may take hundreds of pages or use dozens of volumes to tell a single story (Schodt, 1996). Visual novels also distort time to focus on dramatic moments and feelings, though they tend to rely more on words than images. This, and their use of multiple endings, means that visual novels make for substantial reading material (Cavallaro, 2009). Visual novels like *Steins;Gate Zero* or *Chaos;Child* may take over forty hours to complete, while *Fate Stay/Night* has over 500,000 words of narrative (Lebowitz and Klug, 2011).

While the experience of fictional time in visual novels has been influenced by manga, visual novel writers have more control over player reading time than mangaka. Due to the power of delivery held by the reader, surprises in comics may be ineffective, simply because readers can cheat and flick ahead (Eisner, 2008). Visual novels prevent users skipping ahead by controlling the delivery of narrative, as code prevents the skipping of unread text. Hence, visuals and narrative are revealed chronologically. The control of animation of sequential narratives in digital comics has been contested elsewhere (Bigerel, 2009). Programmers may purposefully delay the unveiling of certain lines of narrative in their code, for dramatic effect, or require user interaction to finish unveiling a sentence, whereas a mangaka cannot control how much time is taken to read a sentence in a panel, or what page is read and in what order.

#### **6. Reading Manga and visual novels**

Generally, Western comics use Z-type reading (left to right, up to down) whereas manga are read right to left (Cohn, 2013). Visual novels, however, despite being written in Japanese, or primarily for Japanese readers, are read in the Western Z-type form. This means that the reader is encouraged to travel right in their reading experience. This is linked to the video game's use of arrows, which often



involves using the right arrow or joystick to move the story and gameplay in that direction. Similarly, visual novels encourage the reader to progress chronologically through the story, moving right to scroll through future narrative.

The reading time of visual novels is also influenced by the length of time it takes for a sound, or line of dialogue to finish playing. This is something that does not affect manga. Comics aren't meant for oral renditions, therefore relying solely on the content found in word balloons will not lead to a coherent understanding of their narratives (Ingulsrud and Allen, 2009). Although there have been exceptions where titles or sections have been read aloud on Youtube (LittleKuriboh, 2008), or over the radio (NYC Mayor LaGuardia's Legendary Radio Readings: NPR, 2008), however, this is not the norm. Usually, readers must take the time to read images and words together. Like manga, a combination of text and images is needed to completely understand a visual novel's narrative, but unlike manga, there is more of a reliance on text. Looking away from the screen, the reader can still understand what is going on when playing visual novels that use voiced dialogue.

## **7. Conclusion**

The influence of manga on the visual novel has meant that the visual novels use of space and time has been shaped by the manga reading experience. Although there are key differences, like how the visual novel's use of sound impacts the time spent reading, manga and visual novels share many similar features; this includes their use of things such as layers, space and compositing. Therefore, while some may argue against comics that use animation or restrict reading (Bigerel, 2009), the visual novel is no longer a paradox; a video game can also be a comic, and share comic features.

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